

Making Science Make Sense: Applied Improvisation in Health and Life Sciences

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Abstract

Both in and out of the classroom, physicians and scientists must speak in a way that generates excitement about their disciplines (Berrett, 2014). They also must communicate vividly to funders and policy makers about their work and why it matters. In every context, these experts must tell engaging stories, respond spontaneously to the needs of the moment, and explain their work in terms non-scientists can understand.

In response, some universities have turned to the techniques of improvisational theater to help scientists to speak more spontaneously, responsively, and engagingly. Over the past year, we have conducted a series of workshops (N=54) for a variety of audiences including, doctoral and post-doc students in the sciences, for educators, for physicians and research scientists, and for doctoral nursing students. The workshops help participants make stronger connections to their multiple audiences. They include content on improvisation skills such as presence and listening, acceptance, recognizing offers, and storytelling to help scientists translate their research in ways that engage their audiences. This approach moves faculty toward understanding communication as a process of collaborative meaning-making, thus helping them to address the “curse of knowledge” by which experts forget the time when they were novices in their field (Bass, 2015).

This poster will report on four key areas of the intervention and evaluation: 1) the need for communication training in the health professions and sciences, 2) the development of the programs, 3) the program efficacy and outcomes. Higher education presents unique challenges for the practice of applied improvisation. While enthusiasm for the work has grown in industry, some audiences within the academy seem resistant to the methods, especially within the sciences. This poster will also address the ways expertise, prestige, and rank affect the practice of applied improvisation in higher education, and we will propose strategies for mitigating resistance.